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(54) **PRE-SALE DATA BROADCAST SYSTEM AND METHOD**

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(58) **Field of Classification Search**
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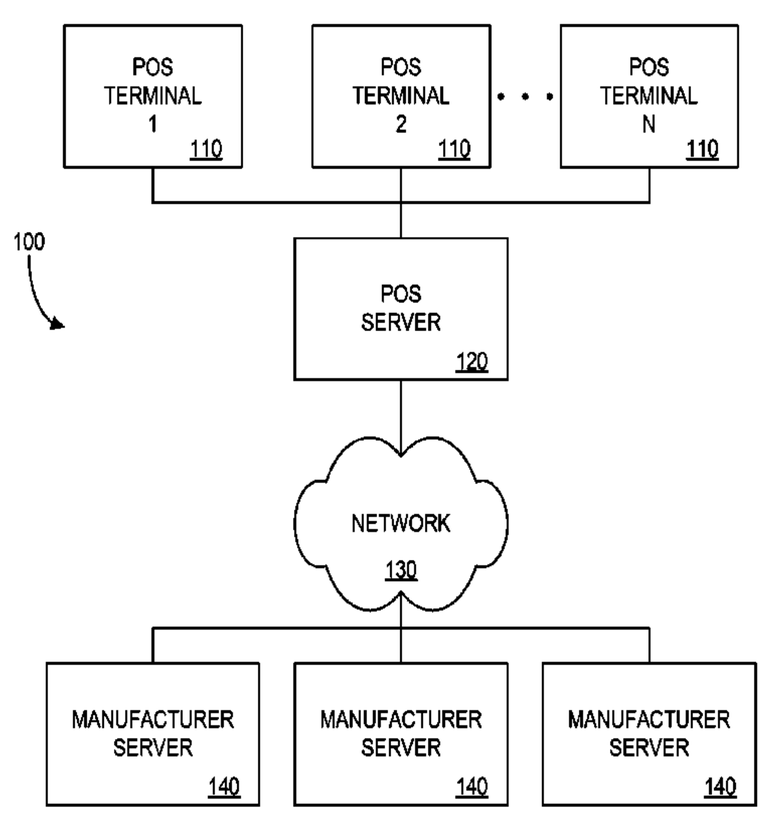
(57) **ABSTRACT**

In one embodiment, a method for promoting the sale of a substitute product at the point of sale (POS). Upon the presentation of an original product for purchase by a consumer at a POS terminal, various manufacturers may decide to offer a substitute product to the consumer, prior to completing the purchase of the original product. If the customer accepts the offer, the point of sale terminal completes the sale of the substitute product.

36 Claims, 13 Drawing Sheets



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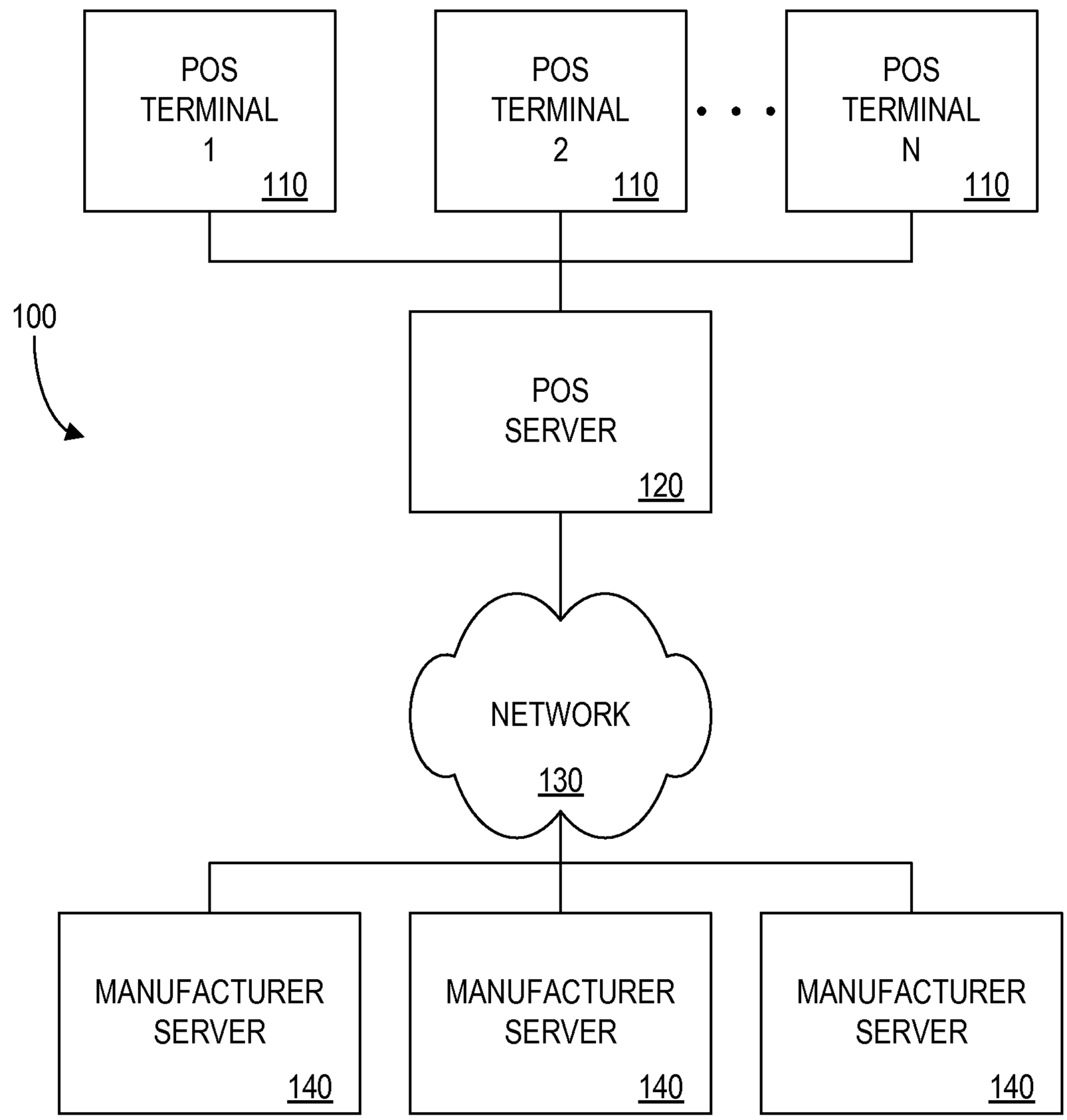
POS TERMINAL 1 110
POS TERMINAL 2 110
POS TERMINAL N 110
100
POS SERVER 120
NETWORK 130
MANUFACTURER SERVER 140
MANUFACTURER SERVER 140
MANUFACTURER SERVER 140

FIG. 1

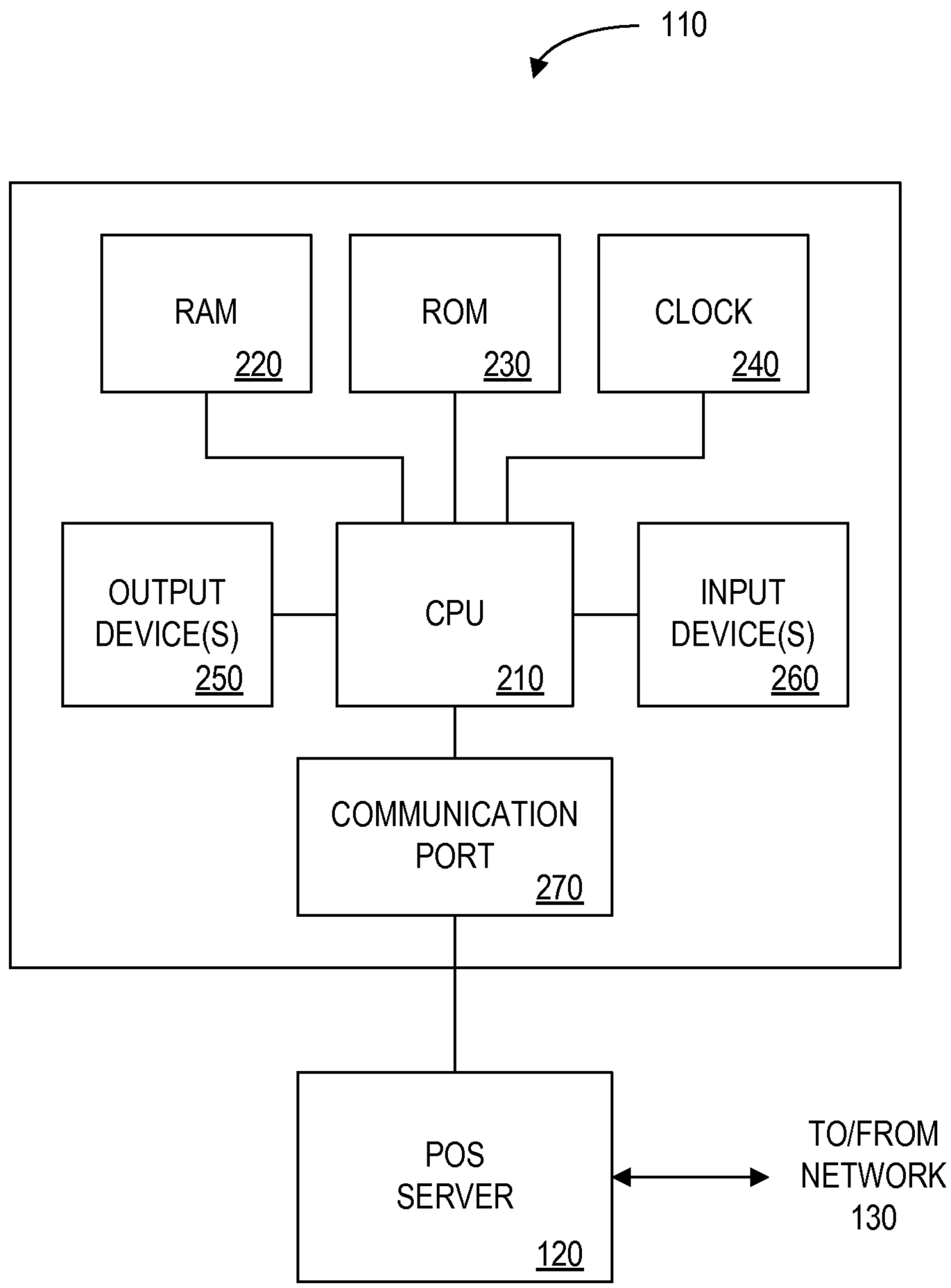
110
RAM
220
ROM
230
CLOCK
240
OUTPUT DEVICE(S)
250
CPU
210
INPUT DEVICE(S)
260
COMMUNICATION PORT
270
POS SERVER
120
TO/FROM NETWORK
130

FIG. 2

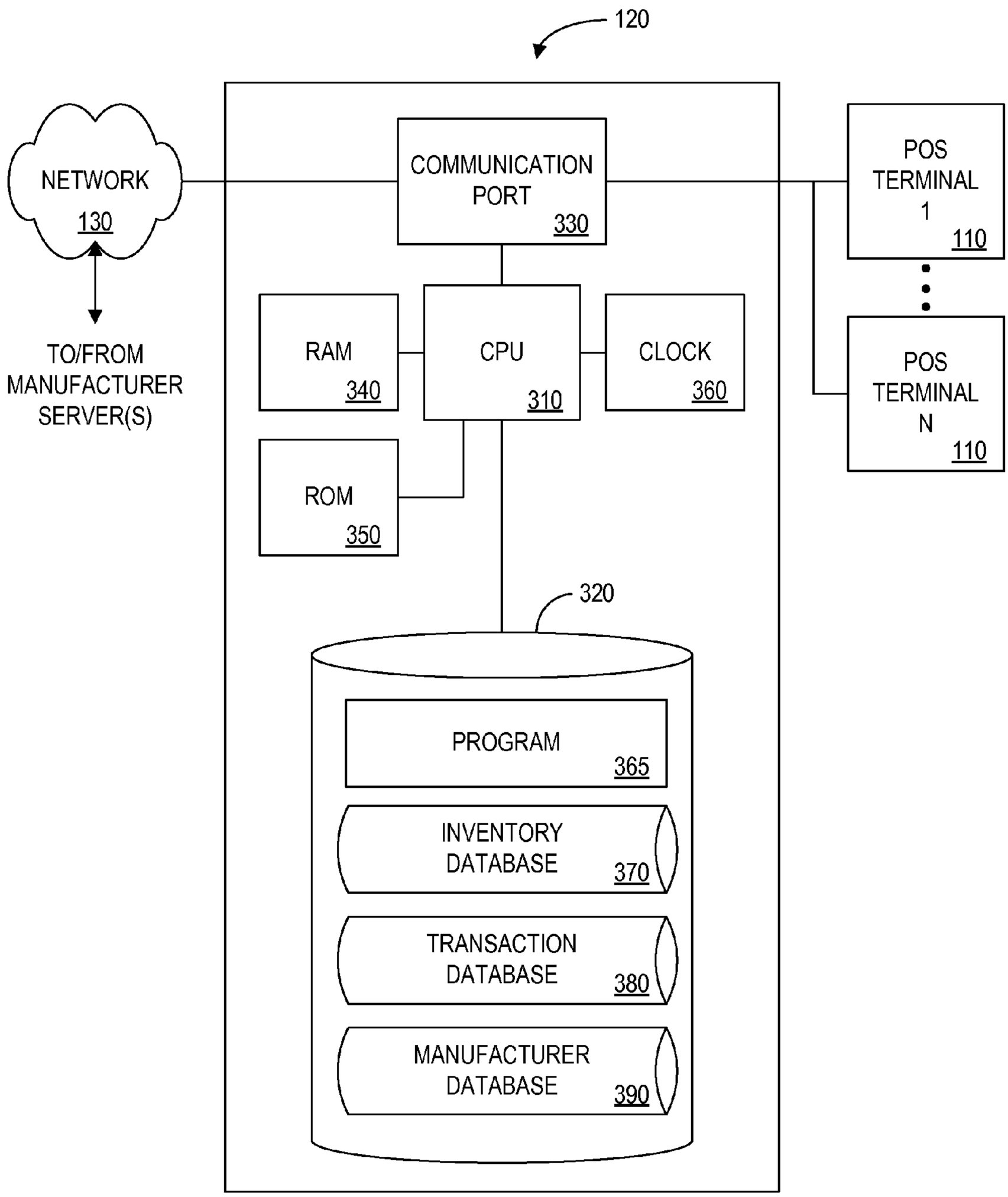
120
NETWORK
130
TO/FROM
MANUFACTURER
SERVER(S)
COMMUNICATION
PORT
330
RAM
340
CPU
310
CLOCK
360
ROM
350
320
PROGRAM
365
INVENTORY
DATABASE
370
TRANSACTION
DATABASE
380
MANUFACTURER
DATABASE
390
POS
TERMINAL
1
110
POS
TERMINAL
N
110

FIG. 3

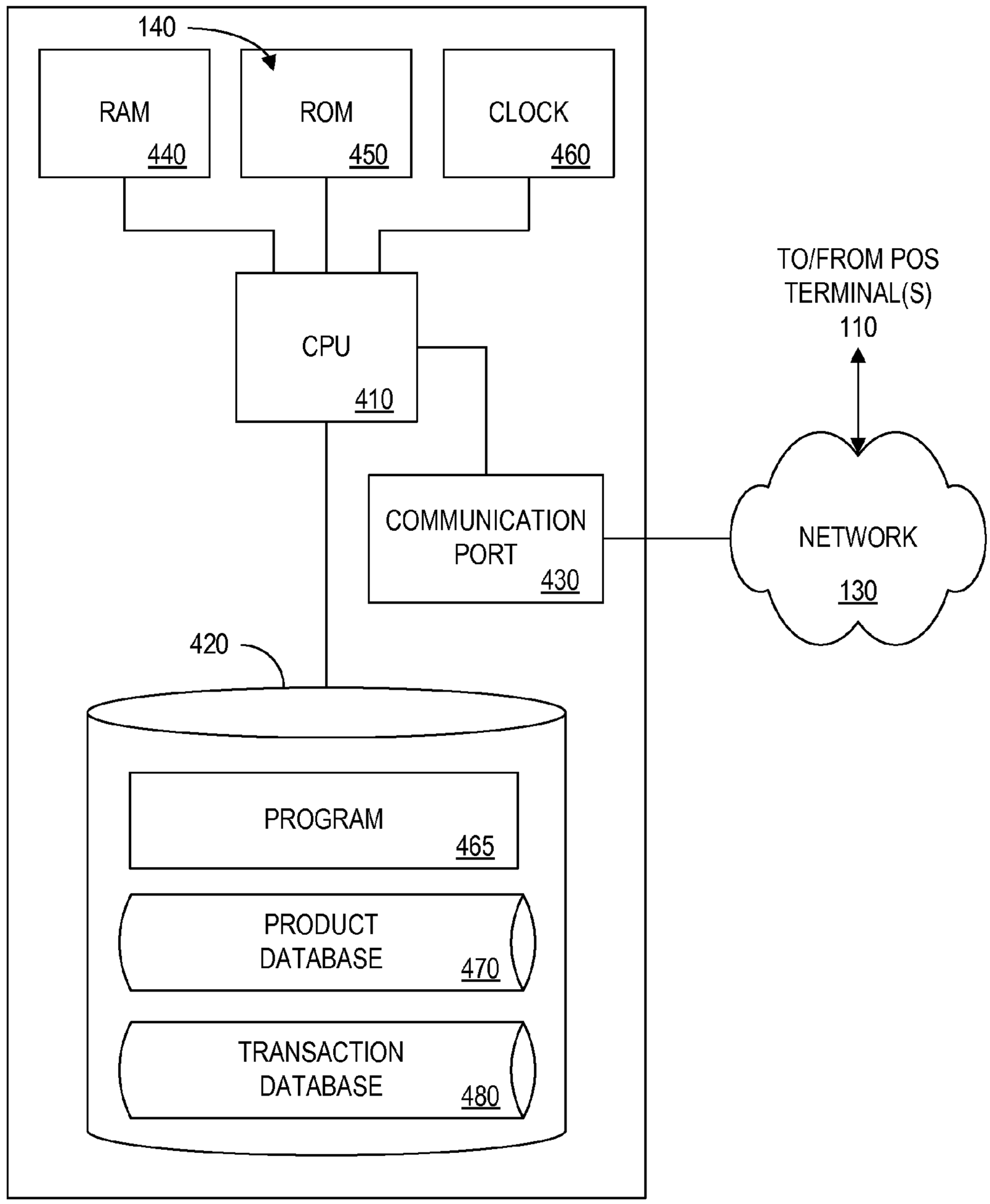
140
RAM
440
ROM
450
CLOCK
460
CPU
410
COMMUNICATION PORT
430
TO/FROM POS TERMINAL(S)
110
NETWORK
130
420
PROGRAM
465
PRODUCT DATABASE
470
TRANSACTION DATABASE
480

FIG. 4

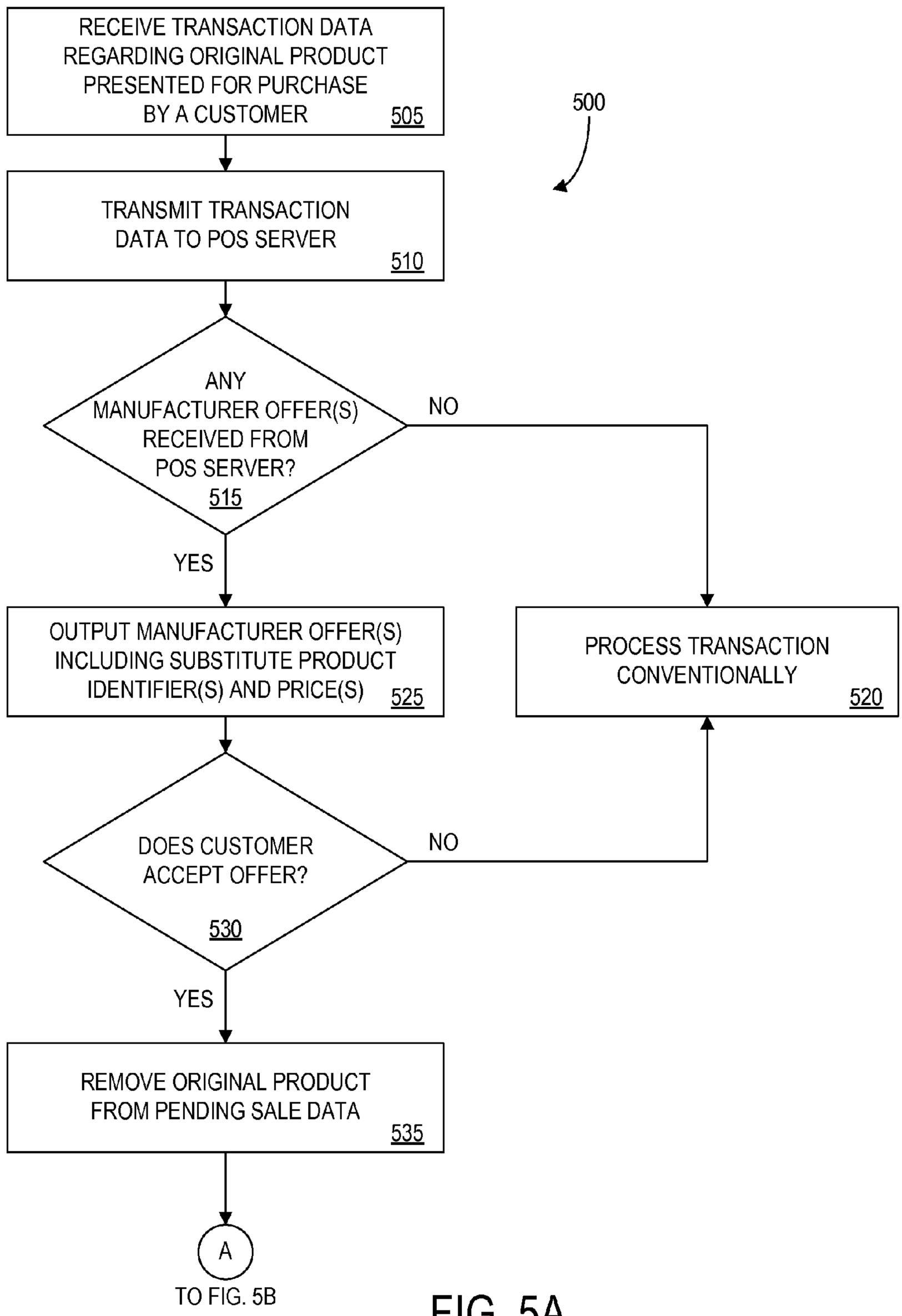
RECEIVE TRANSACTION DATA REGARDING ORIGINAL PRODUCT PRESENTED FOR PURCHASE BY A CUSTOMER 505
500
TRANSMIT TRANSACTION DATA TO POS SERVER 510
ANY MANUFACTURER OFFER(S) RECEIVED FROM POS SERVER? 515
NO
YES
OUTPUT MANUFACTURER OFFER(S) INCLUDING SUBSTITUTE PRODUCT IDENTIFIER(S) AND PRICE(S) 525
PROCESS TRANSACTION CONVENTIONALLY 520
DOES CUSTOMER ACCEPT OFFER? 530
NO
YES
REMOVE ORIGINAL PRODUCT FROM PENDING SALE DATA 535
A
TO FIG. 5B

FIG. 5A

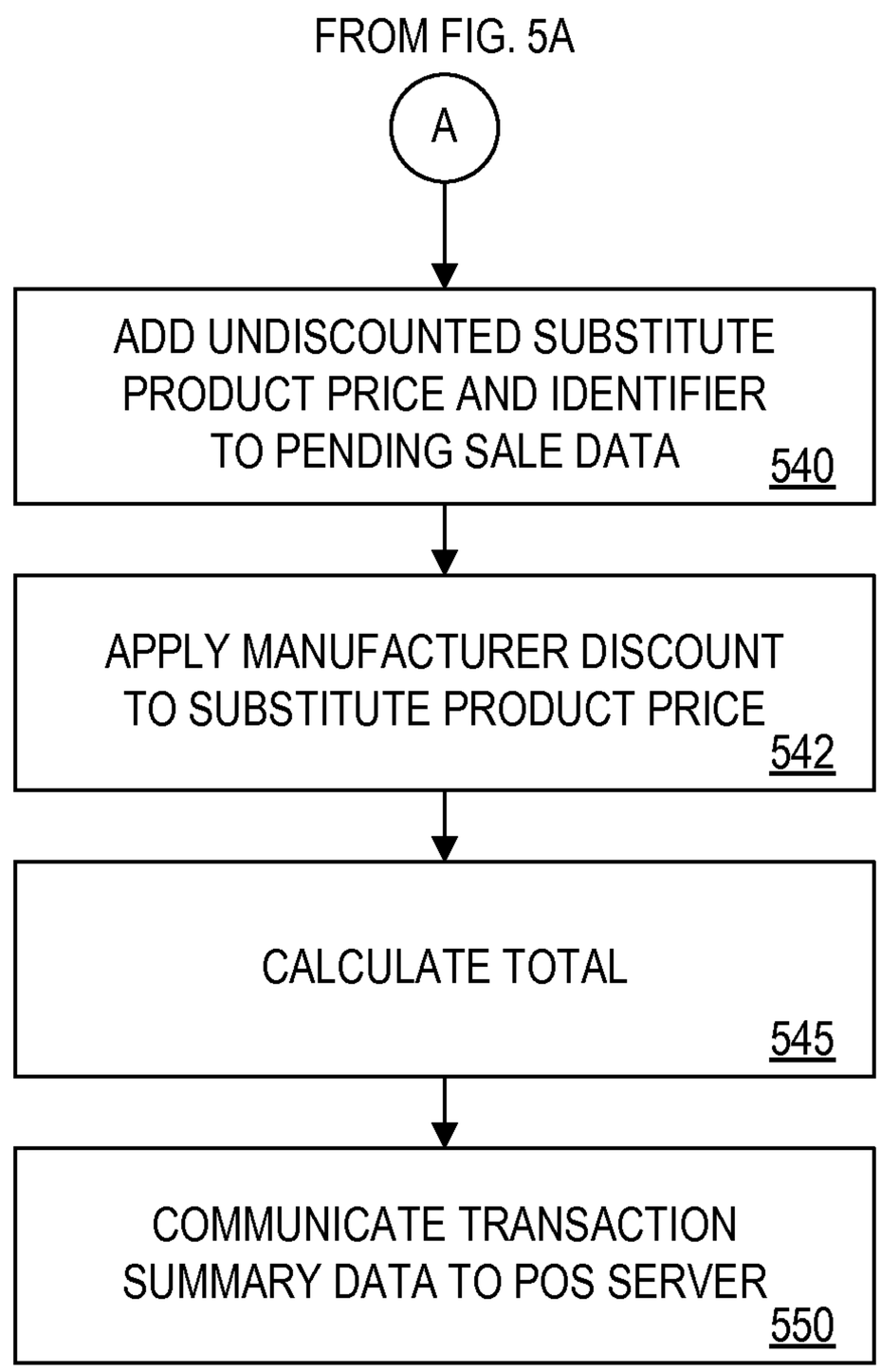
FROM FIG. 5A
A
ADD UNDISCOUNTED SUBSTITUTE PRODUCT PRICE AND IDENTIFIER TO PENDING SALE DATA
540
APPLY MANUFACTURER DISCOUNT TO SUBSTITUTE PRODUCT PRICE
542
CALCULATE TOTAL
545
COMMUNICATE TRANSACTION SUMMARY DATA TO POS SERVER
550

FIG. 5B

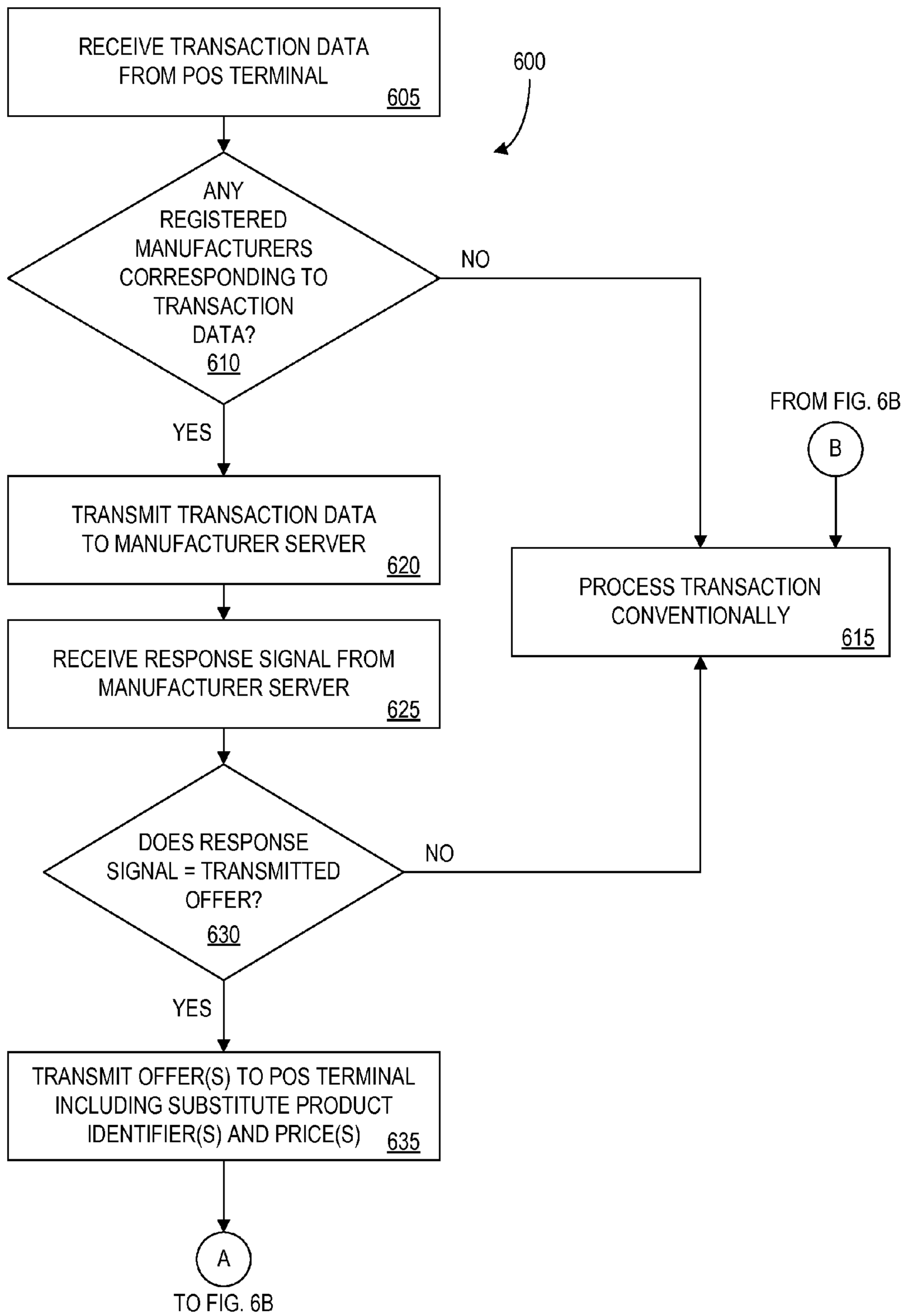
600
RECEIVE TRANSACTION DATA FROM POS TERMINAL
605
ANY REGISTERED MANUFACTURERS CORRESPONDING TO TRANSACTION DATA?
610
NO
YES
FROM FIG. 6B
B
TRANSMIT TRANSACTION DATA TO MANUFACTURER SERVER
620
PROCESS TRANSACTION CONVENTIONALLY
615
RECEIVE RESPONSE SIGNAL FROM MANUFACTURER SERVER
625
DOES RESPONSE SIGNAL = TRANSMITTED OFFER?
630
NO
YES
TRANSMIT OFFER(S) TO POS TERMINAL INCLUDING SUBSTITUTE PRODUCT IDENTIFIER(S) AND PRICE(S)
635
A
TO FIG. 6B

FIG. 6A

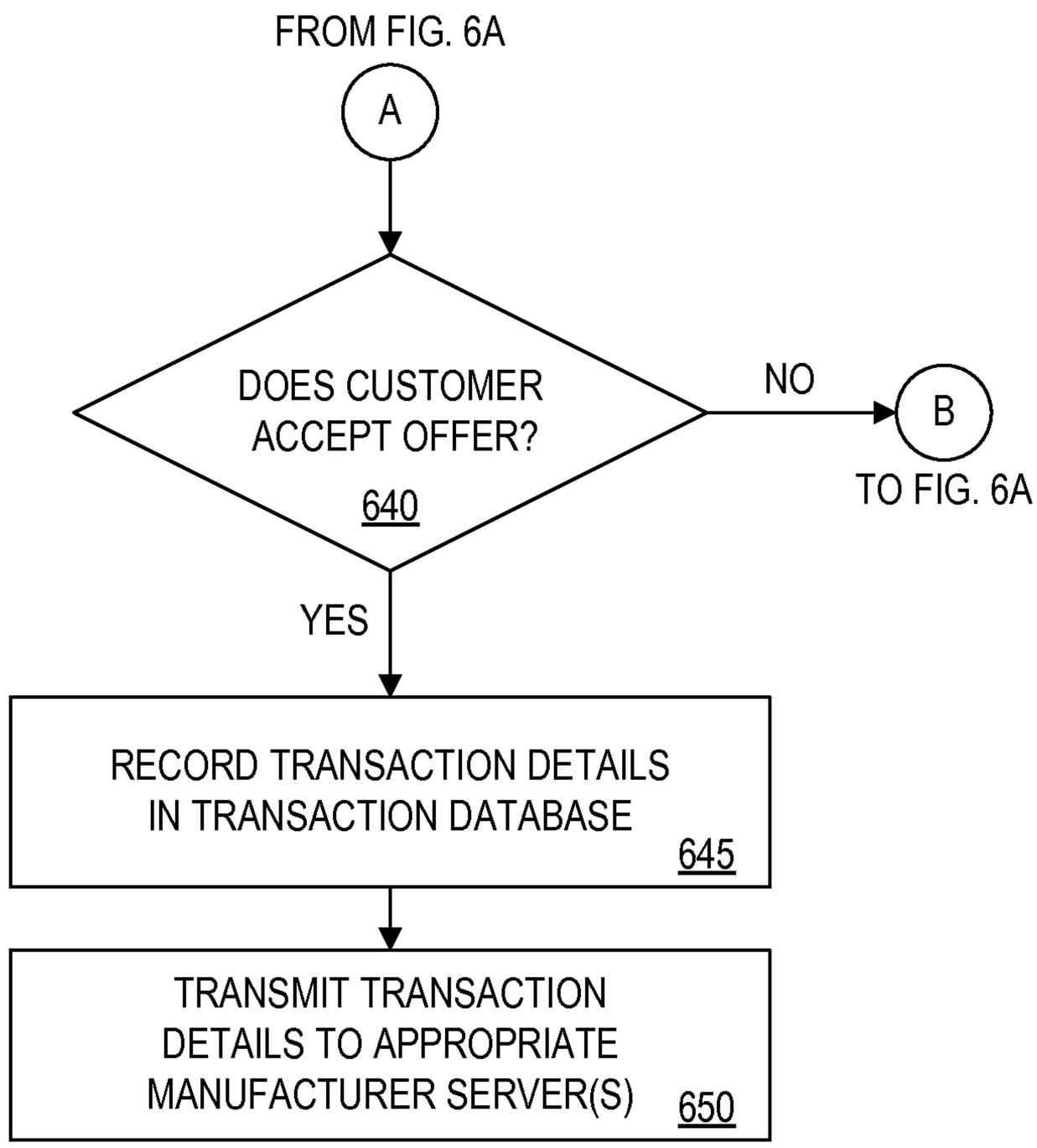
FROM FIG. 6A
A
DOES CUSTOMER ACCEPT OFFER?
640
NO
B
TO FIG. 6A
YES
RECORD TRANSACTION DETAILS IN TRANSACTION DATABASE
645
TRANSMIT TRANSACTION DETAILS TO APPROPRIATE MANUFACTURER SERVER(S)
650

FIG. 6B

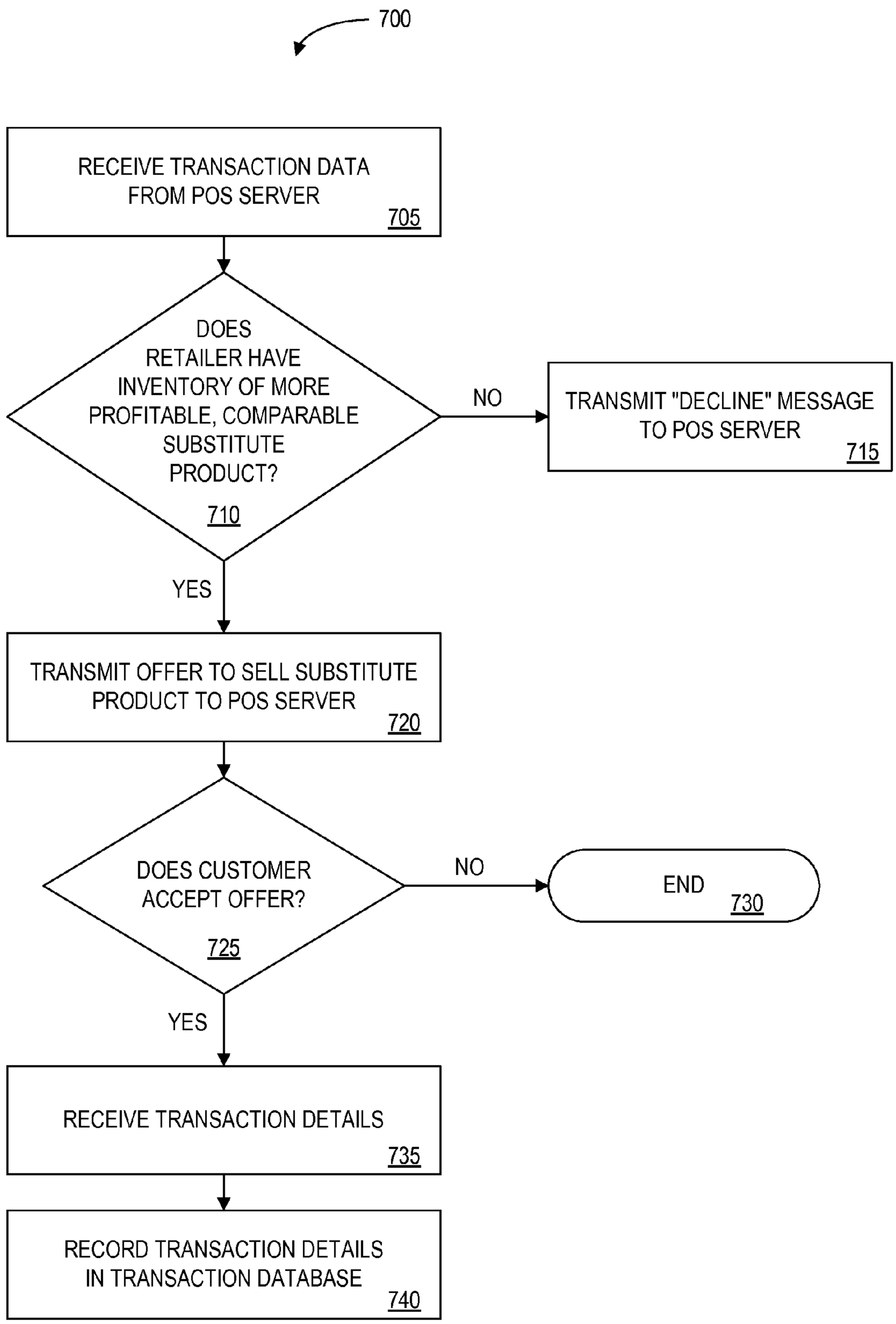
700
RECEIVE TRANSACTION DATA FROM POS SERVER
705
DOES RETAILER HAVE INVENTORY OF MORE PROFITABLE, COMPARABLE SUBSTITUTE PRODUCT?
710
NO
TRANSMIT "DECLINE" MESSAGE TO POS SERVER
715
YES
TRANSMIT OFFER TO SELL SUBSTITUTE PRODUCT TO POS SERVER
720
DOES CUSTOMER ACCEPT OFFER?
725
NO
END
730
YES
RECEIVE TRANSACTION DETAILS
735
RECORD TRANSACTION DETAILS IN TRANSACTION DATABASE
740

FIG. 7

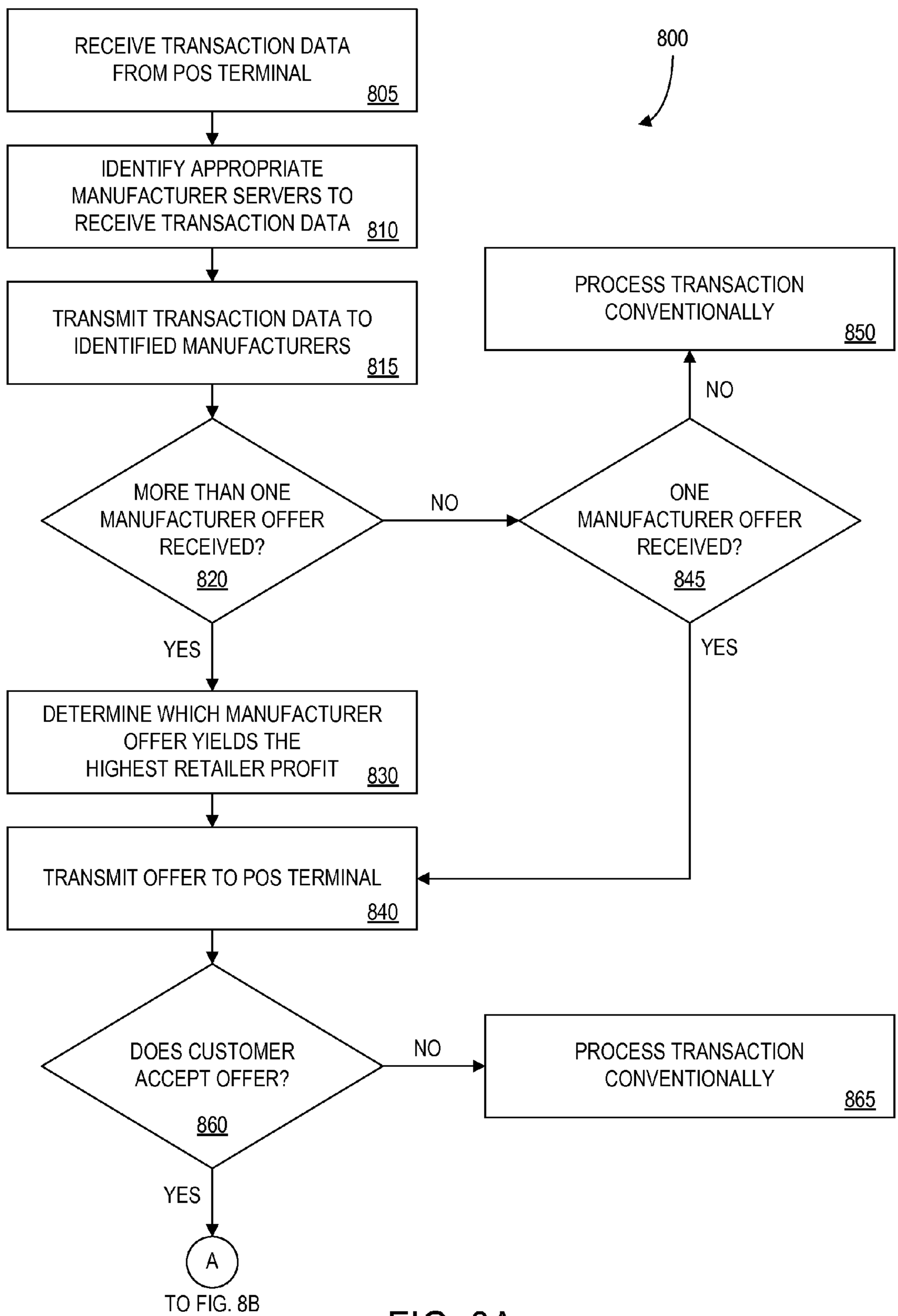
800
RECEIVE TRANSACTION DATA FROM POS TERMINAL
805
IDENTIFY APPROPRIATE MANUFACTURER SERVERS TO RECEIVE TRANSACTION DATA
810
TRANSMIT TRANSACTION DATA TO IDENTIFIED MANUFACTURERS
815
MORE THAN ONE MANUFACTURER OFFER RECEIVED?
820
NO
ONE MANUFACTURER OFFER RECEIVED?
845
NO
PROCESS TRANSACTION CONVENTIONALLY
850
YES
YES
DETERMINE WHICH MANUFACTURER OFFER YIELDS THE HIGHEST RETAILER PROFIT
830
TRANSMIT OFFER TO POS TERMINAL
840
DOES CUSTOMER ACCEPT OFFER?
860
NO
PROCESS TRANSACTION CONVENTIONALLY
865
YES
A
TO FIG. 8B

FIG. 8A

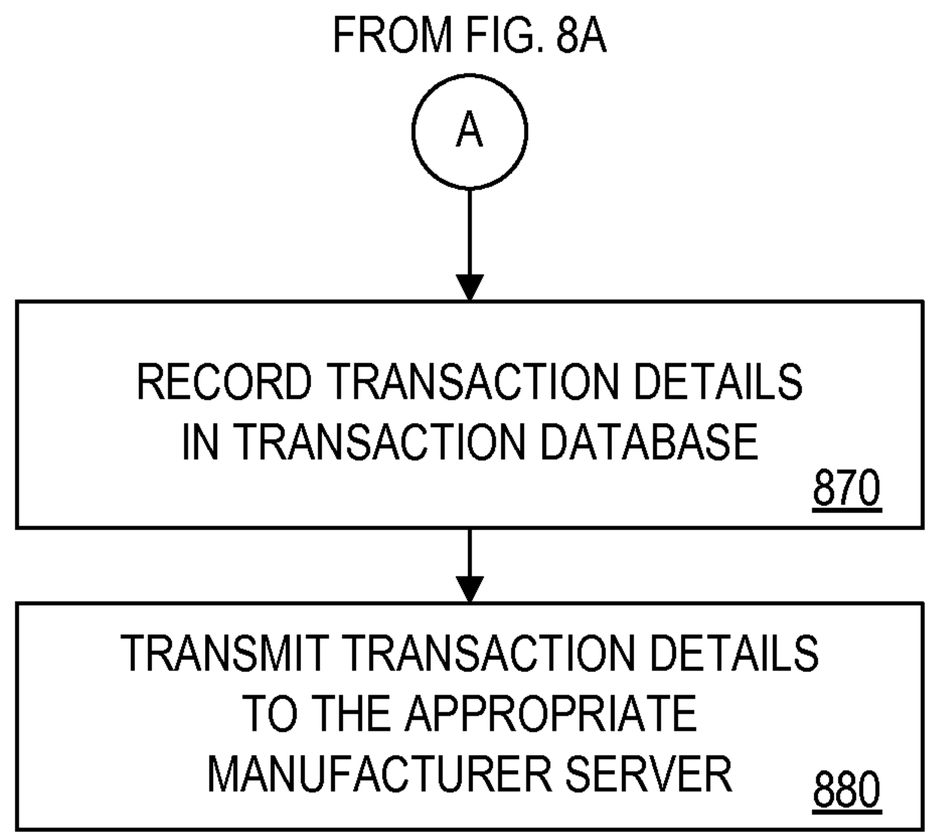
FROM FIG. 8A
A
RECORD TRANSACTION DETAILS IN TRANSACTION DATABASE
870
TRANSMIT TRANSACTION DETAILS TO THE APPROPRIATE MANUFACTURER SERVER
880

FIG. 8B

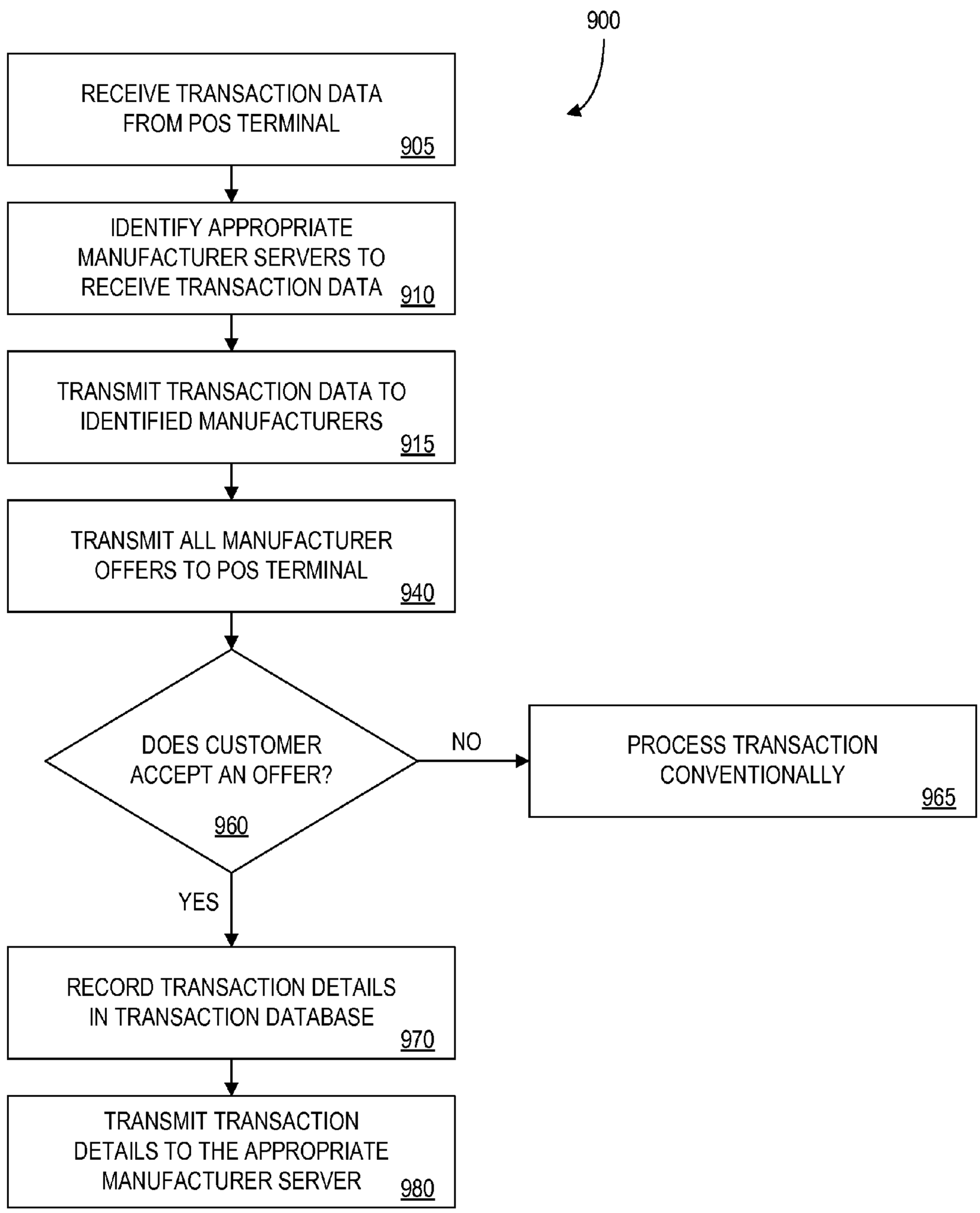
900
RECEIVE TRANSACTION DATA FROM POS TERMINAL 905
IDENTIFY APPROPRIATE MANUFACTURER SERVERS TO RECEIVE TRANSACTION DATA 910
TRANSMIT TRANSACTION DATA TO IDENTIFIED MANUFACTURERS 915
TRANSMIT ALL MANUFACTURER OFFERS TO POS TERMINAL 940
DOES CUSTOMER ACCEPT AN OFFER? 960
NO
PROCESS TRANSACTION CONVENTIONALLY 965
YES
RECORD TRANSACTION DETAILS IN TRANSACTION DATABASE 970
TRANSMIT TRANSACTION DETAILS TO THE APPROPRIATE MANUFACTURER SERVER 980

FIG. 9

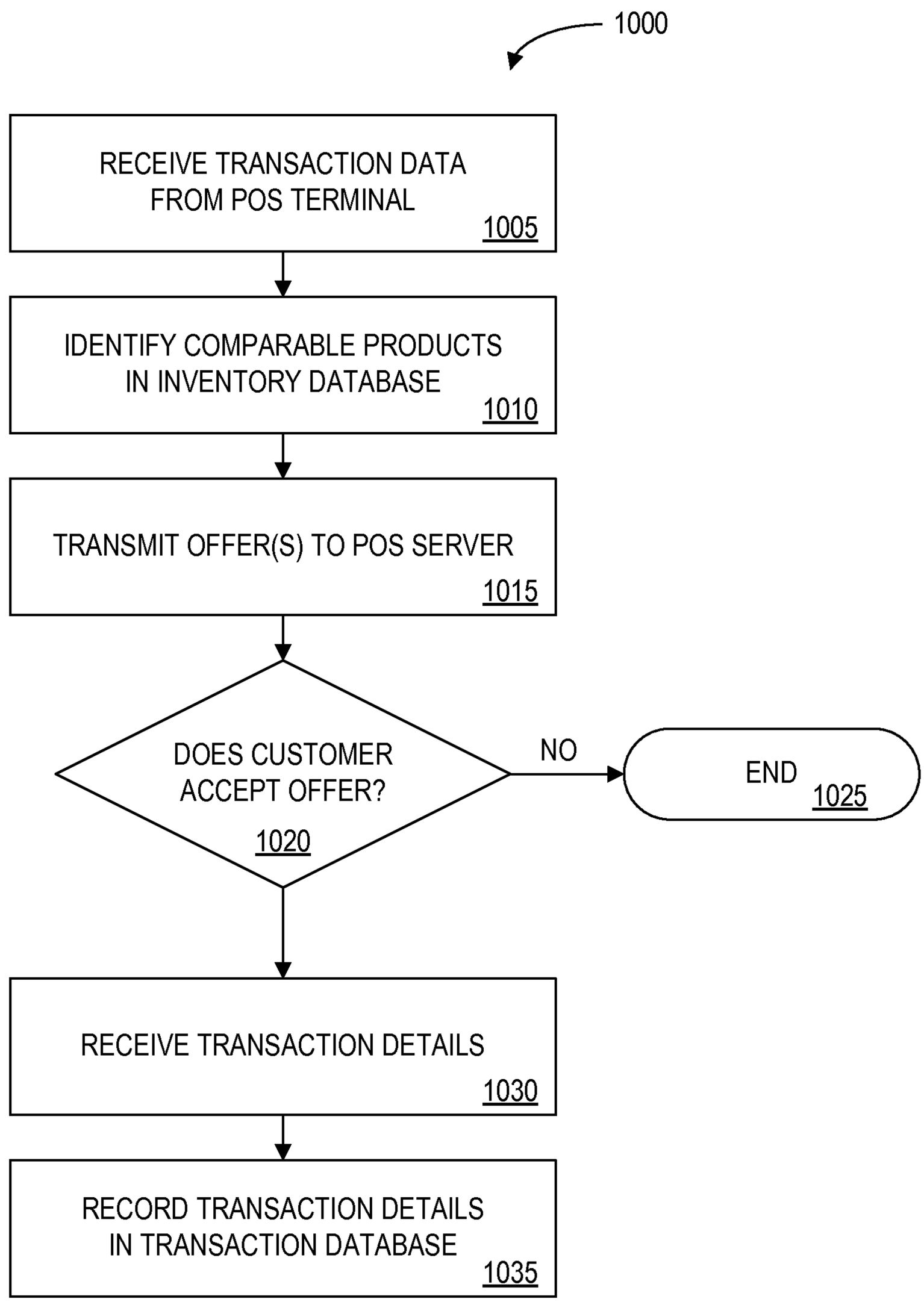
1000
RECEIVE TRANSACTION DATA FROM POS TERMINAL
1005
IDENTIFY COMPARABLE PRODUCTS IN INVENTORY DATABASE
1010
TRANSMIT OFFER(S) TO POS SERVER
1015
DOES CUSTOMER ACCEPT OFFER?
1020
NO
END
1025
RECEIVE TRANSACTION DETAILS
1030
RECORD TRANSACTION DETAILS IN TRANSACTION DATABASE
1035

FIG. 10

PRE-SALE DATA BROADCAST SYSTEM AND METHOD

CROSS-REFERENCE TO RELATED APPLICATIONS

The present application is a continuation of U.S. patent application Ser. No. 12/974,742 filed Dec. 21, 2010 and issued as U.S. Pat. No. 8,112,359 on Feb. 7, 2012, entitled "PRE-SALE BROADCAST SYSTEM AND METHOD", which is a continuation of U.S. patent application Ser. No. 11/549,435 filed Oct. 13, 2006 and issued as U.S. Pat. No. 7,856,379 on Dec. 21, 2010, which is a continuation of U.S. patent application Ser. No. 09/221,099, filed Dec. 28, 1998 and issued as U.S. Pat. No. 7,236,942 on Jun. 26, 2007.

U.S. patent application Ser. No. 09/221,099 is a continuation-in-part of U.S. patent application Ser. No. 08/994,426, entitled "METHOD AND APPARATUS FOR PROVIDING SUPPLEMENTARY PRODUCT SALES TO A CUSTOMER AT A CUSTOMER TERMINAL", filed Dec. 19, 1997, and issued as U.S. Pat. No. 6,694,300 on Feb. 17, 2004; and U.S. patent application Ser. No. 09/221,099 is also a continuation-in-part of U.S. patent application Ser. No. 09/166,405, entitled "METHOD AND APPARATUS FOR DEFINING ROUTING OF CUSTOMERS BETWEEN MERCHANTS," filed Oct. 5, 1998 and issued as U.S. Pat. No. 6,405,174 on Jun. 11, 2002. Each of the above-referenced applications is incorporated by reference herein in its entirety.

FIELD OF THE INVENTION

The present invention relates generally to point-of-sale (POS) systems, and more specifically to POS marketing systems.

BACKGROUND OF THE INVENTION

Cash registers have historically been used by retailers to manage transactions. Specifically, cash registers perform efficient and accurate tallying and reporting duties. As retailers have begun to increasingly rely on sales data, POS systems have gradually started to replace conventional cash registers. Today, POS systems utilize data for both accounting and marketing purposes.

For example, retailers have used data obtained from a POS system to manage frequent shopper programs. In such programs, customers often carry cards with a machine-readable indicia, such as magnetic stripes or bar codes. The cards identify the customer to the POS system which tracks purchase behavior. The transaction data which can be obtained through the POS system may include one or more of the following: (i) the items an individual purchased, (ii) the frequency at which an individual shops, (iii) an individual's average purchase total, and/or (iv) an individual's coupon redemption behavior. In addition, transaction data can be aggregated to account for regional and demographic behavior such as reactions to sales and promotions. While customers are rewarded for their loyalty, a database of such information is formed.

Product manufacturers have also utilized data collected through POS systems for marketing purposes. Manufacturers use the data to track product performance and the impact of manufacturer promotions, such as coupons and rebates. Manufacturers can benefit from the ability provided by the POS to instantly and directly market to individual customers. For example, many manufacturers profit through many POS couponing services offered by systems such as those disclosed in various U.S. Pat. Nos., including 4,723,212; 4,910,672; 5,173,851; and 5,612,868.

The benefits realized by manufacturers through the use of POS data and current POS marketing techniques are grossly exaggerated, however. Sales data drastically diminishes in value by the time manufacturers have a chance to analyze the data and make decisions on their analysis. Post-sale sales data, at best, can be used to influence a customer's subsequent purchases. For one-time or infrequent purchases, data indicating that a customer purchased a competing brand is relatively useless to a manufacturer in that the customer has already purchased the competitor's product. Furthermore, although prior systems may give customers targeted coupons instantly after a purchase at the POS, this is too late to encourage current consumer behavior because the customer must bring the coupon back to the store at a subsequent visit.

In addition, because coupons and rebates require a further active step in addition to the initial purchase, the effectiveness of such programs is minimal. This deficiency can be attributed to a manufacturer's extremely passive role in such promotions. Coupons are printed, distributed, and left to customers to redeem. Customers, however, often forget to bring such coupons to the store, and often misplace such coupons. Even so-called "coupon-less" frequent shopper card systems require shoppers to carry cards, which are burdensome to carry and are also lost or frequently forgotten. Because coupons suffer low redemption rates, coupons are inevitably a poor vehicle for manufacturers to effectively provide customer value. In addition, rebate offers are often ignored because of the inconvenience to the buyer in redeeming the offer. Ultimately, customers often find rebates valueless because the amount of money to be redeemed can be rather insubstantial compared to the effort and postage required for redemption.

Manufacturers have also historically been limited in their ability to compete with other manufacturers at retail locations. At best, manufacturers can effectively compete by packaging products more attractively and by obtaining better positioned retailer shelf space. Because manufacturers are not actively involved in retail transactions and sales efforts, they miss opportunities to market directly to ready, willing and able buyers at a time when buyers are making purchasing decisions.

SUMMARY OF THE INVENTION

It is an object of the present invention to provide a method and apparatus for more effectively marketing products to consumers.

In accordance with the present invention, manufacturers can market products directly to consumers at the time of purchase. Prior to completing the sale of an original product at a POS terminal, one or more manufacturers can offer comparable substitute products to a customer. As such, customers need not actively seek and/or redeem promotional benefits after a purchase, thereby enhancing manufacturer marketing efforts.

In one embodiment of the present invention, the method for promoting the sale of substitute products includes receiving transaction data regarding an original product presented for purchase by a consumer at a point of sale terminal; determining a substitute product to be offered to the consumer during a transaction session; and offering the substitute product to the consumer before the transaction session terminates. The method of determining the substitute product to be offered to the customer may be based on factors such as product profit margin, product inventory information, product expiration

date, retail product price information, product floor price information, product sales information, sale and promotional pricing information, product demand, product forecasts, product class, product pricing, and product features. This method may be carried-out by the manufacturers' servers, retailer's server and/or various POS terminals, as well as other devices.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

FIG. **1** is a block diagram illustrating an overview of a system in accordance with the present invention.

FIG. **2** is a block diagram illustrating an exemplary POS terminal in accordance with the present invention.

FIG. **3** is a block diagram illustrating an exemplary POS server in accordance with the present invention.

FIG. **4** is a block diagram illustrating an exemplary manufacturer server in accordance with the present invention.

FIGS. **5**A and **5**B together comprise a flowchart illustrating a process performed by the POS terminal in accordance with one embodiment of the present invention.

FIG. **6**A & **6**B together comprise a flowchart illustrating a process performed by a POS server in accordance with one embodiment of the present invention.

FIG. **7** is a flowchart illustrating a process performed by a manufacturer's server in accordance with one embodiment of the present invention.

FIGS. **8**A and **8**B together comprise a flowchart illustrating a process performed by a POS server in accordance with another embodiment of the present invention.

FIG. **9** is a flowchart illustrating a process performed by a POS server in accordance with another embodiment of the present invention.

FIG. **10** is a flowchart illustrating a process performed by a manufacturer's server in accordance with various embodiments of the present invention.

DETAILED DESCRIPTION OF SEVERAL EMBODIMENTS OF THE PRESENT INVENTION

The present invention provides a POS system configured to actively solicit manufacturer marketing promotions during a sales transaction. As used throughout the application, the term "manufacturer" refers to any product supplier, regardless of whether or not the supplier actually manufactures the end product that is sold through retail channels. By directly marketing to customers at the time of purchase, but prior to consummation of the purchase, manufacturers market directly to customers, thereby enhancing their marketing efforts. Further, since such customers have already indicated their readiness to purchase the product, the manufacturers are assured that their marketing efforts have an increased chance of success. As such, the present invention provides manufacturers a greater opportunity to compete with other manufacturers at retail locations. The present invention also provides a greater opportunity for retailers to accelerate the sale of overstocked, distressed and/or slow-selling merchandise. As such, customers need not actively realize promotional benefits after a purchase, through any form of coupon or rebate redemption.

In various embodiments of the present invention, a central POS server is connected via a communication port to at least one POS terminal and at least one remote manufacturer server. After the initiation of a transaction at a POS terminal, but before consummation of the transaction, the POS server contacts one or more manufacturer servers. The POS server notifies the manufacturer server(s) of a transaction in progress and provides the manufacturer server(s) with transaction data such as product identifiers, customer identifiers, inventory data, or the like. After receiving the transaction data, a manufacturer server may evaluate the data to determine if the customer's product selection best serves the manufacturer's financial interest. If not, the manufacturer server would return a signal to the POS server conveying a promotional offer to encourage the buyer to favorably switch products. For example, the manufacturer may determine that it would be more profitable for the customer to purchase the manufacturer's product rather than a competitor's product. In the alternative, the manufacturer may determine that it would be more profitable if the customer were to purchase a different one of its own products rather than the one the customer has selected. If the customer accepts the offer, the POS terminal voids the sale of the original product from the pending transaction subtotal, adds the substitute product's price to the subtotal, adjusts the price of the substitute product to reflect the manufacturer's discount and completes the sale of the substitute product.

With reference to the Figures, various embodiments and exemplary POS terminals, POS servers and manufacturer servers, and their methods of operation, will now be described. The leading number of each reference number used throughout the drawings indicates the first figure in which the reference number is introduced.

With reference to FIG. **1**, the overall system **100** of one embodiment of the present invention is shown. In this embodiment, the system **100** includes N number of POS terminals **110**, a POS server **120**, a network **130** and N number of manufacturer servers **140**, each of which will be described in greater detail below.

POS terminals **110** are connected via communication ports to the POS server **120**. Although three POS terminals are shown in FIG. **1**, it is to be understood that the system **100** may have as few as one POS terminal or as many as N number of POS terminals. Each of the POS terminals **110** includes a card authorization terminal ("CAT"), such as those manufactured by Verifone, Inc., or a similar device for generating data relating to a purchase, such as purchase price, items purchased and other purchase parameters. The POS terminals **110** transmit this generated data to the POS server **120**, thereby providing information to the POS server **120** relating to the purchase. The POS server **120** communicates via a network **130**, such as the internet, LAN, WAN, or a telephone network, to communicate with one or more manufacturer servers **140**. It is to be understood however that the POS server **120** may communicate with the POS terminals **110** and manufacturer servers **140** through other media, such as through wireless communication devices.

With reference to FIG. **2**, an exemplary POS terminal **110** is shown. The POS terminal **110** includes a CPU **210**, which may contain one or more conventional microprocessors, and is connected to a RAM **220**, ROM **230**, clock **240**, one or more output device(s) **250**, one or more input device(s) **260**, and a communications port **270** for communicating with the POS server **120**. Output devices **250** may include devices such as LCD displays, LED displays, CRT terminals, and printers, among other devices. The input devices **260** may include a keyboard, cardreaders, and touch screen devices, among others.

With reference to FIG. **3**, a schematic block diagram of an exemplary POS server **120** is shown. The POS server **120** includes a CPU **310**, which may contain one or more conventional microprocessors, and a data storage device **320**, which may contain an appropriate combination of magnetic, optical

and semiconductor memory devices. The CPU **310** communicates with POS terminals **110** and network **130** via a communication port **330**. The CPU **310** and the storage device **320** may be (i) located entirely within a single computer or other computing device; (ii) connected to each other by a remote communication link such as a serial port cable, telephone line or radio frequency transceiver; or (iii) a combination thereof.

The POS server **120** also includes a RAM **340**, a ROM **350** and a clock **360** which are disposed in communication with the CPU **310**. The storage device **320** stores (i) a program **365** for controlling the CPU **310**; (ii) an inventory database **370**; (iii) a transaction database **380** and (iv) a manufacturer database **390**. The program **365** drives the CPU **310** to operate in accordance with the present invention and with the methods described in detail herein. The program **365** further includes additional program elements that may be necessary, such as "device drivers," for allowing the CPU **310** to interface with other devices.

The inventory database **370** stores information regarding products that the retailer currently has in stock. For example, the inventory database **370** may contain information such as UPC codes, corresponding prices and corresponding available quantities. The inventory database **370** may also be accessed during a conventional transaction to check for prices and update inventory status. In one embodiment of the present invention, the inventory database **370** may be indirectly queried by a manufacturer server to see if a retailer has a sufficient inventory of a particular product for possible selection as an offered substitute product.

In general, it is to be understood that the inventory database **370** may contain a wide array of information for use by the POS server **120** and/or manufacturer servers **140**, such as product profit margin information, product inventory information, product expiration date information, retail product price information, product floor price information, product sales information, sale and promotional pricing information, product demand information, product forecast information, product class information, product pricing information, and information regarding product features. Product profit margin information reflects the differences between prices paid by the retailer, and the prices at which products are to be sold by the retailer. Product inventory information reflects the identity and quantity of each of the products in inventory. This information may indicate inventory at a particular location, within a particular geographic region and/or across all stores of a retailer. Product expiration date information may include expiration dates of perishable items, and/or pre-defined dates which determine when a product is outdated (i.e., when it becomes "last year's" model). Retail product price information includes current prices of products, whether or not in inventory. Product floor price information includes prices of products currently on display at a retailer. Product sales information may include the number and type of products sold over a period of time. Product demand information may also be included to reflect recent product sales rates over a period of time, as well as the number of "rain-checks" issued for particular products. Sale and promotional pricing information may include past, present and likely future sale prices and promotions. Product forecast information may include projections of likely consumer demand for particular products, particularly during specific shopping seasons. Product class information may include general classifications such as "consumer appliance" or "TV," or more specific classification such as "flat screen TV." Specific product feature information may also be included.

The transaction database **380** stores information regarding transactions for later reconciliation with the manufacturer for any promotional discounts, coupons and the like. Such information may include the time of a particular transaction, a frequent shopper ID, product identifiers for substitute products sold, the quantity of substitute products sold, the prices of substitute products sold, manufacturer discounts applied to substitute products (and therefore owed by the manufacturer to the retailer) and UPC data, among other information.

The manufacturer database **390** stores information that is used by the POS server **120** to manage pre-sale data broadcasts to manufacturers. The manufacturer database **390** may contain rules and instructions regarding which manufacturer(s) to contact, as well as when and how to contact the manufacturer(s). For example, the manufacturer database **390** may contain rules to contact only registered manufacturers who have subscribed with a service to receive such information. In such an embodiment, interested manufacturers pay a registration and/or subscription fee to receive information regarding customer purchases, thereby giving the registered manufacturer(s) the opportunity to offer substitute products. In addition, the manufacturer database **390** may contain rules regarding when the manufacturer is to be contacted. For example, a manufacturer may be contacted when a competing product is scanned at a retailer's POS terminal, or when a product having a certain "product class" denoted by the UPC code is scanned. The manufacturer database **390** may also contain rules on how to contact the manufacturer including internet and e-mail addresses, telephone numbers to initiate electronic communication via communication port **330**, and the like.

With reference to FIG. **4**, a schematic block diagram of an exemplary manufacturer server **140** is shown. The manufacturer server **140** includes a CPU **410**, which may contain one or more conventional microprocessors, and a data storage device **420**, which may contain an appropriate combination of magnetic, optical and semiconductor memory devices. The CPU **410** communicates with network **130** via a communication port **430**. The manufacturer server **140** further includes RAM **440**, ROM **450** and a clock **460** which are disposed in communication with CPU **410**. Storage device **420** stores (i) a program **465** for controlling the CPU **410**; (ii) a product database **470**; and (iii) a transaction database **480**. The CPU **410** and the storage device **420** may be (i) located entirely within a single computer or other computing device; (ii) connected to each other by a remote communication link such as a serial port cable, telephone line or radio frequency transceiver; or (iii) a combination thereof.

The program **465** drives the CPU **410** to operate in accordance with the present invention and with the methods described in detail herein. The program **465** further includes additional program elements that may be necessary such as device drivers for allowing the processor to interface with other devices.

The product database **470** stores information that is used by the manufacturer server **140** to make decisions on comparable but more profitable substitute products to offer to a customer. The product database **470** may store information such as UPC codes, prices, description of features, price floors, profit margins, and other information. The product database **470** may also include information similar to that found in inventory database **370** of a POS server **120**, such as product demand information and product pricing information.

The transaction database **480** stores data relating to all transactions that are made with a retailer POS server **120**. As such, information contained within the transaction database **480** may be used for purposes of settlement, reconciliation, reporting, and auditing, among other purposes.

With reference to FIGS. **5**A and **5**B, a flowchart **500** describing the method performed by the POS terminal **110** in various embodiments of the present invention is shown. The illustrated method is performed after a customer has presented a product for purchase at a retailer's POS terminal **110**.

Transaction data which represents a customer's product selection is first received by the POS terminal **110** (step **505**). This data may be entered manually by an employee of the retailer, or may be derived from the UPC code of the product selected by the customer. In one embodiment of the invention, original product data is then entered as pending sale data in the POS terminal **110**. In an alternate embodiment of the invention, original product data is only entered as pending sale data in the POS terminal **110** if the customer declines a manufacturer's substitute product offer.

The POS terminal **110** transmits the transaction data to the POS server **120** (step **510**) and awaits receipt of any manufacturer's offer(s). If no such offer is received from the POS server **120**, the sale of the original product is processed and completed conventionally (step **520**). If, however, one or more manufacturer offers are received from the POS server **120** (step **515**), the one or more manufacturer offers are outputted and communicated to the customer (step **525**). Each manufacturer offer includes a substitute product identifier and its corresponding price which are communicated to the customer. The manufacturer offer(s) may be communicated to the customer in any of a variety of ways, including verbal communication by the retailer's sales attendant to the customer, outputting the information to a printer and displaying the information to the customer, or displaying the offer(s) to the POS terminal **110** for viewing by the customer. It is to be understood, however, that other means of communicating the manufacturer offers to the customer may also be used.

If the customer does not accept the offer (step **530**), the sale of the original product is conventionally completed (step **520**). Upon acceptance of the offer (step **530**), the POS terminal **110** removes original product information from pending sale data (step **535**), adds the undiscounted substitute product price to the pending sale data (step **540**), and applies the manufacturer discount (step **542**) to arrive at the price at which the substitute product was offered to the customer. It is to be understood that various alternate techniques may also be used. For example, the POS terminal **110** may receive signal from the POS server **120** to replace the original product data with substitute product data in the pending sale data.

A purchase total is ultimately calculated (step **545**), the sales transaction is completed and transaction summary data is communicated to the POS server **120** (step **550**). This information is used by the POS server **120** to update the inventory database **370** and the transaction database **380**.

With reference to FIG. **6**, a flowchart **600** describing the method performed by the POS server **120** in accordance with one embodiment of the present invention is shown. The POS server **120** receives transaction data from a POS terminal **110** regarding an original product presented for purchase by a customer (step **605**). Based on instructions provided in program **365**, and information contained in the inventory database **370**, the transaction database **380** and the manufacturer database **390**, a determination is made by the POS server **120** as to whether any manufacturers are registered to receive transaction data (step **610**) corresponding to the original product. If no registered manufacturers correspond to the transaction data, the transaction is processed conventionally (step **615**) and the sale of the original product is completed at the POS terminal **110**. In one embodiment, a signal is transmitted to the POS terminal **110** to indicate that no substitute product offer is available. In another embodiment, no signal is sent to the POS terminal **110**, and the sale of the original product is completed at the POS terminal **110** after a designated amount of time has passed and no information has been received from the POS server **120**.

It is to be understood that there may be many situations in which no substitute products are offered. For example, if there are no alternative substitute products available in the inventory database **370** corresponding to the inventory of a particular retailer, the POS server **120** may conclude that no substitute product is available. In another example, there may be no registered manufacturers which could offer substitute products for the original product.

If there are registered manufacturers which correspond to the transaction data (step **610**), the transaction data is transmitted to one or more manufacturer servers **140** (step **620**) and the POS server **120** awaits receipt of a response signal from the one or more manufacturer servers **140** (step **625**). If the POS server **120** receives a response signal indicating that one or more manufacturers transmitted an offer for a substitute product (step **630**), the one or more substitute product offers (including the substitute product identifier(s) and price(s)) are transmitted to the POS terminal (step **635**). If no response is received from the manufacturer server(s) or if responses are received from the manufacturer server(s) indicating that no substitute product offers are to be made (step **630**), the sale of the original product is processed conventionally and the sale of the original product is completed (step **615**). If the customer does not accept the offer for the substitute product (step **640**), the sale of the original product is also processed conventionally (step **615**).

If the customer does accept the offer (step **640**), an acceptance signal is received from the POS terminal **110** and the transaction details are recorded in the transaction database **380** (step **645**). The POS server **120** also transmits the transaction details to the appropriate manufacturer server(s) **140** (step **650**). This information is ultimately used to assure that the manufacturer of the substitute product compensates the retailer for the amount of the discount. In one embodiment of the present invention, if several manufacturers have provided substitute product offers, only the one manufacturer whose substitute product offer was accepted by the customer receives an indication of the customer's acceptance. In another embodiment of the present invention, all of the manufacturers who have submitted substitute product offers receive information regarding the completion of the substitute product sale.

With reference to FIG. **7**, a flowchart **700** describing the method performed by a manufacturer server **140** in accordance with one embodiment of the present invention is shown. The manufacturer server **140** receives transaction data from the POS server **120** regarding an original product presented for purchase by a customer (step **705**). The manufacturer server **140** may also receive information regarding the inventory of a retailer from the inventory database **370** of the POS server **120**. The manufacturer server **140** determines whether the retailer has inventory of one or more profitable and comparable substitute products (step **710**). If not, the manufacturer server may transmit a decline message to the POS server **120** (step **715**). If the retailer does have sufficient inventory of more profitable and comparable substitute products, the manufacturer server **140** transmits an offer to sell one or more substitute product(s) to the POS server **120** (step **720**). This offer includes a substitute product identifier and a substitute product price to be conveyed to the customer. If the customer accepts the offer (step **725**), transaction details are ultimately received from the POS server **120** (step **735**) and the transaction details are recorded in the transaction database

480 (step 740). If the customer does not accept the offer, the manufacturer server 140 may update the transaction database 480 to record that no transaction was completed for a specific substitute product offer, or the manufacturer server may simply take no action in response to the customer's decline of the substitute product offer (step 730).

In determining if the retailer has inventory of more profitable but comparable product, various alternate procedures may be used. In one embodiment, the manufacturer server 140 queries the inventory database 370 and the manufacturer product database 470 to determine if a more profitable but comparable product is available. In another embodiment, the manufacturer server 140 may query the POS server 120 to see if the retailer has an available inventory of a substitute product or may be based upon an assumption that the retailer is likely to have inventory of such a substitute product. In another embodiment, the profitability determination may be made automatically by the manufacturer server 140 or may be made manually by an operator of the manufacturer server 140. Such an evaluation may be based on various factors including those found in inventory database 370 such as: expiration dates, retail and floor prices, upcoming sales and promotions, demand rates, and forecasts, among others. It is to be understood that there are numerous ways to accomplish this determination, each of these ways falling within the scope of the instant invention.

With reference to FIGS. 8A and 8B, a flowchart 800 describing the method performed by a POS server 120 in accordance with another embodiment of the present invention is shown. In this embodiment, multiple manufacturers are contacted by the POS server 120, which screens any offers to determine which offer yields the highest retailer profit. The POS server 120 transmits only this highest profit yielding offer to the POS terminal 110.

The POS server 120 receives transaction data from a POS terminal 110 regarding an original product presented for purchase by a customer (step 805). Based on instructions provided in program 365, and information contained in the inventory database 370, the transaction database 380 and the manufacturer database 390, the POS server 120 identifies appropriate manufacturer servers to receive the transaction data (step 810). In so doing, the POS server 120 may query the manufacturer database 390 for information. Appropriate manufacturers may be those sharing a similar Standard Industry Classification (SIC) code as the original product presented for purchase by a customer, or may be those manufacturers that are preregistered with the POS server 120. As such, manufacturers can subscribe for the service or can be sent offers regardless of their affirmative participation in the program. Transaction data is then transmitted to the identified manufacturer(s) (step 815). If more than one manufacturer offer is received (step 820), the POS server 120 determines which manufacturer offer yields the highest retailer profit (step 830) and transmits the chosen offer to the POS terminal 110 (step 840). If only one manufacturer offer was received (step 845), the POS server 120 transmits the offer to the POS terminal 110 (step 840). If no manufacturer offer is received (step 845), a signal is transmitted to the POS terminal 110 to process the sale of the original product presented by the customer in a conventional manner (step 850).

If the customer does not accept the offer (step 860), the sale of the original product is completed conventionally at the POS terminal 110 (step 865). If the customer does accept the offer (step 860), a signal is received from the POS terminal 110 indicating acceptance of the offer and the POS server 120 records the transaction details, including price, product identifier, retailer identification, and the like, in the transaction database 390 (step 870). The POS server 120 then transmits the transaction details to the appropriate manufacturer server which provided the accepted substitute product offer (step 880).

In determining which manufacturer offer yields the highest retailer profit (step 830), various techniques may be used. The evaluation may include queries of the inventory database 370, the transaction database 380 and the manufacturer database 390. As such, the evaluation may be based on factors such as expiration dates, retail and floor prices, upcoming sales and promotions, demand rates, and forecasts, among others. It is to be understood that these and other factors may be used in the determination of which manufacturer offer would yield the highest profit for the retailer.

With reference to FIG. 9, a flow chart 900 describing the method performed by the POS server 120 in accordance with another embodiment of the present invention is shown. In this embodiment, multiple manufacturers are contacted by the POS server 120 and, if multiple offers are received, all of the multiple offers are communicated to the customer. In response, the customer may select one or more substitute product offers.

The POS server 120 receives transaction data from a POS terminal 110 regarding an original product presented for purchase by a customer (step 905). Based on instructions provided in program 365, and information contained in the inventory database 370, the transaction database 390 and the manufacturer database 390, the POS server 120 identifies appropriate manufacturer servers to receive transaction data (step 910), in much the same manner as in the aforementioned embodiment of FIG. 8 (see step 810). The POS server 120 then transmits any manufacturer offers to the POS terminal 110 (step 940).

If the customer does not accept any offer (step 960), the sale of the original product is completed conventionally at the POS terminal 110 (step 965). If the customer does accept one or more offers (step 960), a signal is received from the POS terminal 110 confirming acceptance of one or more of the offers and the POS server 120 records the transaction details in the transaction database 390 (step 970). The POS server 120 then transmits the transaction details to the appropriate manufacturer server(s) which provided the accepted substitute product offer(s) (step 980).

With reference to FIG. 10, a flow chart 1000 describing the method performed by a manufacturer server 140 in accordance with the embodiments of FIGS. 8 and 9 is shown. The manufacturer server 140 receives transaction data from the POS server 120 regarding an original product presented for purchase by a customer (step 1005). The manufacturer server 140 also receives information regarding the inventory of a retailer from inventory database 370 of the POS server 120. The manufacturer server 140 identifies comparable products in the inventory database 370 (step 1010) and determines whether any substitute product offer is to be made to the customer. If so, the substitute product offer is transmitted to the POS server 120 (step 1015). If the customer does not accept the offer (step 1020), the manufacturer server 140 may record various details regarding the rejection of the substitute product offer, or otherwise end the process (step 1025). If the customer does accept the offer (step 1020), the manufacturer server 140 receives the transaction details (step 1030) and records these details in transaction database 480 (step 1035).

Additional Alternate Embodiments

It is also to be understood that various additional alternative embodiments are also envisioned in the present invention. In one such alternate embodiment, the substitute product offer may be supplemented by a supplemental or complementary

product offer, rebate, or the like. Such supplemental product offering techniques are disclosed in commonly-assigned and co-pending patent application Ser. No. 08/994,426, which is hereby incorporated by reference.

In another embodiment of the present invention, the POS server **120** does not transmit transaction data directly to the manufacturers server **140**. Rather, a "middle man" system is used in which the POS terminal **110** transmits data to a central service (which may be operated for example by a credit card processor or issuer) which then communicates with manufacturers on behalf of the POS server **120**.

In another embodiment of the present invention, a secure database can be employed by the POS server **120** to receive and store manufacturer offer rules from manufacturer servers **140**. In such an embodiment, manufacturers need not be queried in real-time during the transaction. As such, the POS server **120** would contain all of the necessary rules and decision-making ability to determine whether substitute product offers are to be made, and to communicate the substitute product offers to the POS terminal **110**. The use of such an alternate embodiment would potentially reduce the time necessary to determine whether substitute product offers are to be made. A technique for ceasing supplementary product offers provided by POS terminals when transaction volume surpasses predetermined levels can be seen in commonly-owned, co-pending U.S. patent application Ser. No. 09/045,386 entitled "Method and Apparatus for Controlling the Performance of a Supplementary Process at a Point of Sale Terminal," filed Mar. 20, 1998, incorporated by reference herein. The present invention recognizes that customers are often unwilling to wait on long slow-moving lines. As such, this embodiment may significantly reduce the time needed to present substitute product offers to customers.

In another embodiment of the present invention which also addresses this concern regarding time delays in offering substitute products to customers, a computer program is used to temporarily stop the use of the substitute product offering techniques of the present invention if the transaction volume (number of transactions per minute) surpasses a predefined threshold. As such, during busy shopping periods, retailers could suspend substitute product offerings to accelerate sales of original products. In addition, in each of the embodiments of the present invention, the system may be configured to automatically and conventionally complete the sale of the original product, if no substitute product offers are received from the POS server **120** within a predetermined time.

In another embodiment of the present invention, the POS server **120** may be programmed to determine whether substitute product offers are to be made based on inventory and information regarding only the retailer. In this embodiment, no information is need from the manufacturer servers **140**. As such, the retailer may directly market substitute products to the customer based on the retailer's own rules. This embodiment may be particularly effective in advancing the sale of overstocked or distressed items in a particular retailer.

In another embodiment to the present invention, secure databases of information regarding manufacturer offer rules and/or retailer offer rules are provided directly to the POS terminals **110**. In this embodiment, the POS terminals **110** may directly determine whether substitute product offers are to be made to customers. The use of such an embodiment would eliminate the need to query various manufacturers, as well as the need to query the POS server **120**. Such information may transmitted to the POS terminals **110** in a number of ways. For example, this information may be encrypted and transmitted over the Internet, communicated over a telephone network or transmitted over a LAN or WAN.

In yet another embodiment to the present invention, the retailer may gather subsidy information from potential subsidizers who are willing to subsidize a portion of the substitute product offer in exchange for some action by the customer. For example, a customer may seek to purchase a product, model X, at the point of sale. This transaction information is communicated to the POS server, along with a customer profile, including information such as frequent shopper information, to a bank. In response, the bank may present the customer with an offer that will add $Y to upgrade the customer's purchase to model Z, if the customer agrees to apply for and/or accept a new credit card offer from the bank. The customer may further be required to purchase the camera with the approved new credit card.

Although the present invention has been described with respect to various embodiments thereof, it is to be understood that various substitutions may be made in those embodiments described herein, without the departing from the spirit and scope of the present invention.

What is claimed is:

1. An apparatus comprising:

a processor;

a communications port in communication with the processor;

a storage device in communication with the processor, the storage device storing instructions configured to direct the processor, when executing the instructions, to:

receive transaction data regarding an original product presented for purchase by a consumer via a point of sale terminal;

upon receiving the transaction data, determine, by the processor based on information about one or more product suppliers registered in a database, at least one substitute product, associated with a respective product supplier, for the original product; and

offer, to the consumer via the point of sale terminal, the at least one substitute product.

2. The apparatus of claim **1**, in which the transaction data includes at least one of: a product price, a product identifier and a product UPC code.

3. The apparatus of claim **1**, the instructions being further configured to direct the processor to:

receive, via the point of sale terminal, an identifier identifying the substitute product.

4. The apparatus of claim **1**, wherein offering the at least one substitute product comprises:

transmitting an indication of the at least one substitute product to the consumer via at least one of: a printer, a display terminal and a speaker.

5. The apparatus of claim **1**, the instructions being further configured to direct the processor to:

receive inventory information of at least one potential substitute product for the original product.

6. The apparatus of claim **1**, the instructions being further configured to direct the processor to:

receive additional information for determination of the at least one substitute product, the additional information comprising at least one of:

product profit margin information,

product inventory information,

product expiration date information,

retail product price information,

product floor price information,

product sales information,

sale and promotional pricing information,

product demand information,

product forecast information,

product class information,
product pricing information, and
information regarding product features.

7. The apparatus of claim **1**, the instructions being further configured to direct the processor to:

receive from the product supplier a respective associated offer for the at least one substitute product associated with the product supplier.

8. The apparatus of claim **1**, in which the product supplier associated with the at least one substitute product is a manufacturer.

9. The apparatus of claim **1**, in which the product supplier associated with the at least one substitute product does not manufacture the at least one substitute product.

10. An apparatus comprising:

a processor;

a communications port in communication with the processor;

a storage device in communication with the processor, the storage device storing instructions configured to direct the processor, when executing the instructions, to:

receive transaction data regarding an original product presented for purchase by a consumer via a point of sale terminal;

upon receiving the transaction data, determine, by the processor based on information about one or more product suppliers registered in a database, at least one supplemental product, associated with a respective product supplier, for the original product; and

offer, to the consumer via the point of sale terminal, the at least one supplemental product.

11. The apparatus of claim **10**, in which the transaction data includes at least one of: a product price, a product identifier and a product UPC code.

12. The apparatus of claim **10**, the instructions being further configured to direct the processor to:

receive, via the point of sale terminal, an identifier identifying at least one of the at least one supplemental product.

13. The apparatus of claim **10**, wherein offering the at least one supplemental product comprises:

transmitting an indication of the at least one supplemental product to the consumer via at least one of: a printer, a display terminal and a speaker.

14. The apparatus of claim **10**, the instructions being further configured to direct the processor to:

receive inventory information of at least one potential supplemental product for the original product.

15. The apparatus of claim **10**, the instructions being further configured to direct the processor to:

receive additional information for determination of the at least one supplemental product, the additional information comprising at least one of:
product profit margin information,
product inventory information,
product expiration date information,
retail product price information,
product floor price information,
product sales information,
sale and promotional pricing information,
product demand information,
product forecast information,
product class information,
product pricing information, and
information regarding product features.

16. The apparatus of claim **10**, the instructions being further configured to direct the processor to:

receive from the product supplier a respective associated offer for the at least one supplemental product associated with the product supplier.

17. The apparatus of claim **10**, in which the product supplier associated with the at least one supplemental product is a manufacturer.

18. The apparatus of claim **10**, in which the product supplier associated with the at least one supplemental product does not manufacture the at least one supplemental product.

19. A method comprising:

receiving, via a point of sale terminal by a server device comprising at least one processor, transaction data regarding an original product presented via the point of sale terminal for purchase by a consumer;

upon receiving the transaction data, determining, by the server device based on information about one or more product suppliers registered in a database, at least one substitute product, associated with a respective product supplier, for the original product; and

offering, by the server device to the consumer via the point of sale terminal, the at least one substitute product.

20. The method of claim **19**, in which the transaction data includes at least one of: a product price, a product identifier and a product UPC code.

21. The method of claim **19**, further comprising:

receiving, via the point of sale terminal, an identifier identifying at least one of the at least one substitute product.

22. The method of claim **19**, wherein offering the at least one substitute product comprises:

transmitting an indication of the at least one substitute product to the consumer via at least one of: a printer, a display terminal and a speaker.

23. The method of claim **19**, further comprising:

receiving inventory information of at least one potential substitute product for the original product.

24. The method of claim **19**, further comprising:

receiving additional information for determination of the at least one substitute product, the additional information comprising at least one of:
product profit margin information,
product inventory information,
product expiration date information,
retail product price information,
product floor price information,
product sales information,
sale and promotional pricing information,
product demand information,
product forecast information,
product class information,
product pricing information, and
information regarding product features.

25. The method of claim **19**, further comprising:

receiving from the product supplier a respective associated offer for the at least one substitute product associated with the product supplier.

26. The method of claim **19**, in which the product supplier associated with the at least one substitute product is a manufacturer.

27. The method of claim **19**, in which the product supplier associated with the at least one substitute product does not manufacture the at least one substitute product.

28. A method comprising:

receiving, via a point of sale terminal by a server device comprising at least one processor, transaction data regarding an original product presented via the point of sale terminal for purchase by a consumer;

upon receiving the transaction data, determining, by the server device based on information about one or more product suppliers registered in a database, at least one supplemental product, associated with a respective product supplier, for the original product; and

offering, by the server device to the consumer via the point of sale terminal, the at least one supplemental product.

29. The method of claim **28**, in which the transaction data includes at least one of: a product price, a product identifier and a product UPC code.

30. The method of claim **28**, further comprising:

receiving, via the point of sale terminal, an identifier identifying at least one of the at least one supplemental product.

31. The method of claim **28**, wherein offering the at least one supplemental product comprises:

transmitting an indication of the at least one supplemental product to the consumer via at least one of: a printer, a display terminal and a speaker.

32. The method of claim **28**, further comprising:

receiving inventory information of at least one potential supplemental product for the original product.

33. The method of claim **28**, further comprising:

receiving additional information for determination of the at least one supplemental product, the additional information comprising at least one of:

product profit margin information,

product inventory information,

product expiration date information,

retail product price information,

product floor price information,

product sales information,

sale and promotional pricing information,

product demand information,

product forecast information,

product class information,

product pricing information, and

information regarding product features.

34. The method of claim **28**, further comprising:

receiving from the product supplier a respective associated offer for the at least one supplemental product associated with the product supplier.

35. The method of claim **28**, in which the product supplier associated with the at least one supplemental product is a manufacturer.

36. The method of claim **28**, in which the product supplier associated with the at least one supplemental product does not manufacture the at least one supplemental product.

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